



Fort Lewis Outdoor Recreation Focus Groups

January 2001

Executive Summary

In January 2001, United States Army Community and Family Support Center (USACFSC) conducted four focus group discussions at Fort Lewis, Washington. The primary purpose of this research was to gather customer-centered information from both users and non-users regarding the identification of the needs and desires of the military community. The information gathered from the groups is relevant, however it must be remembered that it primarily represents the opinions of users of the program. Of 24 respondents, only 4 were non-users. Several key issues emerged as a result of conducting this study:

- Washington and Fort Lewis are great places to be if you're a sportsman.
- The retirees were concerned about taking care of the active duty soldier.
- Hours of operation at several facilities may not be meeting the need.
- Respondents felt ill informed of activities/events available.

Recommendations

Based on the discussions with the participants, recommendations are as follows:

- Develop a "newcomer's" packet identifying all MWR programs/services available at Fort Lewis and provide them to all new soldiers, spouses, civilians and retirees coming into the area. Or consider having a representative brief at in processing/newcomer's orientations.
- Utilize e-mail and/or the Internet to publicize upcoming events.
- Look at co-locating ITT and the Northwest Adventure Center in the NAC. Be the one-stop shop for trips, tours, equipment and tickets.
- Continue to evaluate equipment for wear and tear. Ensure equipment is at peak condition before renting out. Repair/replace as needed.
- Look at facility operating hours. Consider varying hours to be open later one or two evenings during the week, and longer on the weekend.
- Consider opening one or two cabins to allow pets under 20 lbs. Perhaps charge a pet deposit up front and prominently mark which cabins allow pets.
- Due to many complaints about the closing of the Rod & Gun club, consider setting up a "lounge" area in the NAC where hunters/fisherman could gather after a day of hunting/fishing. Perhaps working with Russell's Landing or another club on this issue might help.

Background

As a continuation of research started in August 1999, the U.S. Army Community and Family Support Center Outdoor Recreation Program Manager requested research assistance at two more installations. The Outdoor Recreation Program was in need of customer-centered information from both users and non-users regarding the identification of the needs and desires of the military community. As with past research conducted, the information gathered will be used to assist the USACFSC Outdoor Recreation Program Manager in developing programs for the 21st century. Information will also be shared with Major Commands and installations to enhance the programs at their levels.

Methodology

In January 2001, the USACFSC marketing research specialist conducted focus groups at two Army installations: Fort Lewis, Washington and Fort Huachuca, Arizona. This continuation of research started in 1999 is to gain a true “Army-wide” perspective regarding the Outdoor Recreation Program. This report describes results from the Fort Lewis groups only. The focus group discussion guide that was used is at Appendix A.

Qualitative research, of which focus groups are a part, provides a rich source of information in idea generation, clarifying existing theories, creating hypotheses, and giving direction to future research. Although the focus group participants were drawn from the groups in the population from whom we seek answers, there were not chosen on any statistical basis. Therefore, no statistical inferences should be drawn from the results of the discussions held. Several key findings emerged as a result of conducting the focus groups and they follow below. The regional specificity of these groups must be kept in mind while reviewing the findings.

General Findings

Participants

Participants of the four groups conducted at Fort Lewis were predominantly male, current users of the Outdoor Recreation programs and services; approximately 60% were currently active duty, 15% retirees, and 25% civilians; average length of time at installation varied between groups – 2.5 yrs for the active duty participants, 25 years for the retirees, and 21 years for the civilians, and nearly all participants lived off post.

Leisure Time

Participants seem to spend most of their leisure time doing the following items in rank order: hunting, fishing, skeet & trap shooting, traveling, camping, skiing/snowboarding, rappelling, going to the theater, computer use, going to pro baseball games and backpacking.

As is past Outdoor Recreation Program focus groups, the Outdoor Recreation activities could be over-represented since we specifically recruited Outdoor Recreation users for several of the groups. Very few non-users were present in any of the groups.

Quality of Life

Participants overall felt the quality of life at Fort Lewis was pretty good – especially if you enjoyed outdoor activities. Fort Lewis is the place to be if you're a sportsman. This is especially evidenced if you look at the average time spent in the Fort Lewis area – 25 years for the retirees and 21 years for the civilians. A few participants commented on the large amount of rainfall they experienced in Washington, but this only seemed to bother a few. Quite the contrary, many of the participants indicated, "you don't even notice it after a while."

What people enjoy most about Fort Lewis (outdoor activities) may also be their biggest competition. One participant said, "It's a really nice place, but the problem up here is there is a lot off post competing with MWR, compared to at Fort Hood where you are out in the middle of nowhere." Of the participants who hunted, many indicated they often hunted off post, due to areas on post being closed due to military training exercises.

The closure of the old Rod & Gun Club seemed to bother many participants. They complained of not having a place to go after a day of hunting to hang out with other hunters, learn hunting/fishing tips, and get something to eat. Both the younger soldiers and the retirees stated this.

Socializing

Is Fort Lewis a good place to socialize? The majority of respondents said no. They agreed there were places to go, but no one ever went there. Younger respondents said they mostly went off post to socialize.

Part of the reason for their disagreement could be due to perceived lack of information. Respondents felt they weren't well informed about what was available on post. This is a common reason given, however, in nearly all surveys/focus groups. Respondents agreed that the information was available at the Northwest Adventure Center, but you had to know to go there first.

The retirees used the skeet range as a place to socialize, but mentioned they missed the Rod & Gun Club.

Other respondents addressed the American Lake Club and Russell Landing..."You can drive by there any day of the week and see how much business they're doing...they don't really do that good, the O'Club is no longer an O'Club. I've never gone there with my family to eat. Before, the first time I was stationed here, was in '86, we used to do it quite often. It was a privilege – an NCO club – you've reached that rank, that status, but now I wouldn't go there

with my wife, with my family. The gates are open.” “There isn’t much to do on post after duty hours.”

Recreation

When asked if Fort Lewis was a good place for recreation, answers were very positive, however, participants still found themselves going off post. One respondent attributed it to the fact that off post is more “open” (referring to closures of on post hunting areas due to military training).

Overall the rifle and skeet range received the best comments. “You can’t beat that here. The rifle and skeet range here are comparable to anywhere else in the Army.”

Some noted improvements centered on replacing old equipment. “I find myself doing more here than going somewhere else. The facilities and equipment are pretty up to par. There are a couple of improvements – some equipment is getting old and needs replaced.” More will be addressed on this issue later in the report.

Sources of information

When asked if they feel well informed about what goes on in Morale, Welfare and Recreation (MWR) in general, or in the Outdoor Recreation facilities, specifically, the answer from participants was mixed. Some felt that more advertising was needed. Others noted there were efforts out there, but to truly find out what was happening, you had to go into the Northwest Adventure Center, but you had to know it was there in order to go in. They noted the electronic marquees, but many said they didn’t pay attention to them as they drove by or that it was hard to catch everything as they drove by. The participants recommended a combination of methods would be best in reaching them, but the best method overall seemed to be electronically, either via e-mail or on the Internet. They suggested sending information directly to every unit via e-mail, or begin collecting e-mail addresses when people register for a program/event, or rent something.

Most participants also mentioned the post newspaper, but said the space given to MWR was limited. But they said the paper was readily available to everyone on post, but also questioned how many people really read it. Many get information via word-of-mouth.

Other participants suggested a monthly update for the NAC...perhaps at the in processing center. Another participant liked the idea of “E-Zines” where you could subscribe to an electronic newsletter that is delivered straight to his inbox.

The retirees suggested the best way to reach them would be to utilize a database to draw a mailing list from and then send out mailers with information about upcoming hunts, the skeet range, etc. directly to them.

Specific Outdoor Recreation Findings

General Comments

In general, comments were mainly positive about recreation from participants. They agreed Washington was a great place to live. Again, this is evidenced by the length of time the retirees (25 years) and civilians (21 years) have lived and worked near Fort Lewis. Here are a few comments from participants:

“They’ve got everything here for people to do.”

“It’s amazing the things they have here.”

“I think Fort Lewis – if you’re a sportsman – is the place to be.”

However, even the users indicated some of the problems, or issues, hindering the program overall. These comments were reiterated in each of the groups, regardless of their status. Here are a few comments:

“It’s a really nice place, but the problem up here is there is a lot off post competing with MWR.”

“The range is a good one. But the hours are terrible.”

“There is a good selection of equipment, but there has to be a point where it is maintained beyond its life.”

People like to go to the Outdoor Recreation Center....

When asked if people like to go to the Outdoor Recreation Center, nearly all the respondents agreed. Some qualified their agreement with, “the people that use it really like it.”

The Outdoor Recreation Center offers a lot to its Patrons...

When asked if the Outdoor Recreation Center offers a lot to its patrons, again, respondents unanimously agreed. However, one participant added “but I want more.”

The Outdoor Recreation Center is a Place for Hobbies/Skill Development

Respondents overall felt unless they were discussing their shooting hobby, Fort Lewis didn’t have much to offer in the way of hobby/skill development. A few of the respondents indicated there used to be a woodworking shop and they missed that. One respondent did say there was one located on McChord, but not on Fort Lewis. One other facility mentioned that catered to hobby/skill development was the auto shop.

The Outdoor Recreation Center is an Important Part of Life...

When asked if the Outdoor Recreation Center is an important part of life, respondents, again, strongly agreed. However, one group identified with it being an important part of life, but felt that too few people actually knew about the Northwest Adventure Center, so questioned how it could be an important part of life. They further suggested that the NAC needed a “salesman” to go around and get some face time with the Sgt. Major to tell him what programs they were offering for the units.

Reasons for Non-Use

Again, very few non-users participated in the four groups held at Fort Lewis. Of those that did participate, one non-user stated the reason for non-use was due to lack of time due to work schedule. The respondent did enjoy outdoor activities, and would be interested in participating if his work schedule would permit.

Frequency of Use

Users were very consistent in their usage patterns. Many utilize the facilities every week or 2x/month. Some were more seasonal users where their usage patterns were higher in the fall/winter during hunting season.

Classes/Trips

For the most part, respondents indicated the current classes/trips offered were sufficient. "Just about anything they want to do they've got people to go." One group addressed the need for a non-shooter safety class...for those people who may want more information about gun safety, but specifically for non-hunters.

Facility

Many of the respondents addressed a facility that used to be open at Fort Lewis – the Rod & Gun Club. The retirees sorely miss that facility. They preferred the old facility as a place to go into after a day of hunting or fishing where they didn't feel out of place.

Respondents from other groups (non-retirees) agreed that the new center is excellent, but the old R&G was a place they could go in to sit around and socialize with others interested in hunting or fishing.

"We have one of the newest, best looking facilities in the Army."

One respondent addressed the rifle range. "We have a good rifle range on post, but we don't have an excellent rifle range on this post. I'd like to see some changes." His changes included: put up PVC pipe to drop targets in, bull's eye tape/reflective tape to put on the target to make it easier to see in the evening, and proper targets to sight in your rifle.

Equipment

Users were very happy with the selection and variety of the equipment at the Northwest Adventure Center. "When I want to rent something, they have it."

However, they noted that some of the equipment was old and needed replaced, due to normal wear and tear. They felt it wasn't fair to charge the same price for something that is brand new vs. something that's old and barely useable.

Another respondent wanted to see more variety in the resale section of guns and bow hunting supplies.

Staffing

Overall the respondents were very positive about the staff of the outdoor recreation programs. "All the employees that I've talked to here are great. They've gone out of their way to do something for me." "The staff is very helpful. They try to accommodate the needs of the customers the best they can and if they can't they find some other means to make up for it."

They did note, however, that due to shortage of staff at the range, if the man running it was ill or out of town, the facility had to close. One participant suggested offering classes where you could be certified as a "safety" then you wouldn't need to have anyone staff the range. You could conduct random spot checks, like they do with hunting and fishing licenses. They also noted that there is only one person who does tune-ups for skis or snowboards "...so it's hard to get your skis in here for tune-ups, regardless of the time of year."

Hours of Operation

For the retirees, the biggest concern was for the active duty soldiers. They felt that MWR had forgotten whom they were here to serve. "If you're going to service the soldier, your facilities have to be open when the soldier is available. That unfortunately doesn't happen here." Mostly it was noted that more weekend and evening hours were needed.

Others noted that hours of operation for the range were mainly posted at the range and you had to drive out there to find out if it was open or not. Perhaps posting hours elsewhere would help.

In one discussion of the travel camp, it was recommended a "camp host" be on staff to coordinate the late arrivals at the travel camp. Was also noted that the two laundry facilities at the travel camp close at 7 p.m. and 9 p.m. Recommended installing some sort of key code on the doors.

Prices

The younger respondents were fairly happy with the prices offered in the outdoor recreation programs. "You can't get much better prices than here." However, they did note they felt the prices for the cabins were too high.

The retirees felt prices overall were too high for the lower enlisted soldier. "Pro rate prices for that private or E4 with a wife and two kids...so they can afford to go on these trips." "It's not fair to pay the same by rank. Should be pro-rated like at the golf course."

Other respondents questioned the price for shooting targets at the range vs. shooting clay targets. They indicated the price was the same regardless of the cost of the target.

Another respondent addressed the cost of renting campers. He questioned the difference in price for a 16' camper vs. the 18' camper. He would like to see a discount for a long-term rental.

Comparisons to Other Installations

“On a scale of 1-10, I’d give these people an 8. That’s really good. On the shooting side they’re not as great as Fort Benning, but they’re a heck of a lot better than Fort Drum. Even beating the Air Force on some installations.”

“Fort Lewis has a lot more variety than other places I’ve been. In Florida they had the Destin Rec Club, and the whole town was on a giant sand bar, so a lot of their emphasis was on beach cabins, boats, romantic getaways for the area. Just like at Alaska, Fort Seward was based on fishing. They did well separately focusing on one single event. Fort Lewis does well to focus on several different events.”

“This center far beats McChord. It’s larger. It’s together with the travel camp. There’s more selection.”

“Fort Bragg has comparable programs to here. Fort Campbell has a little less, maybe more on the hunting side there.”

“Korea probably had the best programs targeted for the soldier that I’ve seen.”

“Hunting places here are always closed, due to training. This is driven from the top down – command. Should be a better liaison between range control and sportsmen.”

Outdoor Recreation Recommendations

Program Interest

Participants were asked which, if any, new programs would be of interest if offered at the Outdoor Recreation Center, and the following resulted.

- Participants would like to shoot action pistols with certain targets...poppers, silhouettes, etc. Also to compete in shooting competitions. Would like to see an indoor range facility offer this type of activity.
- Rappelling
- Participants in 3 of 4 groups indicated an interest in sky diving
- Rock climbing
- A few of the respondents indicated they’d like to see the wood shop open up again.

- “Maybe not programs, but I’d like to see during fishing season, there are some really great lakes that they close off for training, like Lake Fiander. I’d like to see – I don’t hunt here at all because of what he said, you go out and scout a really great deer and you get ready to do on opening day, they say, no, that area’s closed. But I’d like to see the Post facilitate to the people more. I’d like to see them figure out some way they do the training during a couple of weeks so folks could hunt. Hunting is a passion for me. I just plain won’t miss it. I don’t know how you could ask a post commander to put his training around that, but that’s what I’d like to see happen. And the same thing for fishing. In the summer I understand we have the ROTC here real heavy and they close everything off. They come in May until August/September, right during the season. You could know the training was going on there, but you didn’t know they were going to close the road 2-3 miles away and you couldn’t even go in that area.”
- “There are several mountains around – I’m not sure if they offer lift tickets here at the adventure center. You have to go to ITT to pick up reduced ski lift tickets, when you have to rent your equipment here. So consolidating those two efforts would be easier for the person to come here and get their ski lift ticket and reduced ski lift tickets and pick up their skis. “
- “I think we have a good idea of having ITT being separately located in the Adventure Center. Because you’re going to ITT to pick up tickets for reduced prices for a trip to Vancouver for a day, go visit the swinging bridge, or whatever, maybe a one-stop shop to meet all your needs in one building. This is a large complex. Why can’t we have one little booth that says ITT – it’s all the way on the other side of post that is just one huge building that is a bus station and the ITT.”
- Offer “hunters specials”.

Most Important Change

Participants were asked to identify the most important change that could be made to encourage their patronage, and the following resulted:

- “Reduce prices on their package deals to go do special events.”
- “More at the range (action pistol, etc.)”
- “Those of us in the military, most of us are young. If you have cool stuff, people are going to be getting it. If there are Winnebagos sitting out there, I don’t care how much it costs. I’m going to rent it and take it to Canada. My whole thing is Sea-Dos. I’d like to be able to take mine out, have all my buddies rent one. It’s a personal watercraft. Their main concern is damage to the vehicle and bodily damage. That’s why sky-diving is something you’ll never see, because there are too many incurred risks.”
- “Reduce the costs.”
- “More information toward the married soldiers. I’m the BOSS rep, so I put out everything. I give it to the First Sgt. I get it via email or letters.”
- “Better management.”
- “Better hours.”

- “Have someone who knows about military life to run it.”
- “People cared about us when we were coming up, but we see the young soldier not being taken care of. A lot of them don’t even have cars.”
- “We used to have a buddy hunt program, where they sign up and folks like us would call them up and go hunting.”
- “These are all beautiful facilities but they’re closed over the holidays.”
- “You gotta take care of them. That’s the reason we’re here. For the soldier...”
- “Maintenance of what they have – everything I do I get charged for it. I appreciate them having it so I can get charged for it, but I hate that they charge me the same for something I can’t use as they would something that was brand new. I’d like to see them understand there is a point at which it needs to be thrown away.”
- “Advertisement”
- “I’ll go to the Internet to see what’s available, but they don’t list any prices, or pictures, but that would be an improvement, for people to be able to see what they’re going to get for the money.”
- “Fort Gordon is working hard on their ITT website just for that reason. I think that’s something that would be good here at ODR.”
- “There’s also a need for making reservations on-line for the travel camp and the equipment and the trips, too.”
- “The majority of the target market is ages 18-25 and most of the programs should be targeted to them. Most of those guys are looking for stuff off post cause they don’t see the opportunity on post. Like this beach, if there were programs there, it would be packed with soldiers. Same as that club – American Lake Club – it’s the biggest club I’ve seen and it’s empty. Right now you have all this new housing on North Fort, younger enlisted housing, if you had decent programming, they would come out. Maybe if you had some sort of on post taxi/shuttle service. Then all that young soldier would have to worry about was getting on that shuttle. There isn’t a lot here for a young, single soldier.”
- “My parents are looking at renting some of the cabins in the next few months. No dogs are allowed there. Maybe they could open a couple of the cabins to pets under 20 lbs. And putting up a flash on those cabins alerting folks if they have allergies they may want to go to a different cabin. There are a lot of people who have small pets that can’t keep them outside. Charge a pet deposit. I bet they’d be willing to pay it, too. People who travel take them with them.”

Closing Comments

Overall, the image of the Outdoor Recreation program at Fort Lewis is a positive one. Granted, there are some improvements to be made, but the key is keeping in touch with your current customers and identifying potential customers and their needs. Listen to what they are telling you. Many of the actions identified from these groups lie in the hands of the program managers at the installation. Identify a staff member who can go out and “sell” the program to various individuals. Utilize satisfied customers to bring in new customers. Perhaps offer incentives in a referral program. Tap into the resources currently available...database to use for direct mailings, either by e-mail or US mail to advertise upcoming events. All of these ideas will benefit the overall program. Keep up the good work and use the data presented in this report to help guide you in future endeavors.

Appendix A

Discussion Guide, Outdoor Recreation January 2001

- I. Introduction:
Introduce myself – CFSC Marketing Research Specialist – I'll be leading discussion.
Joe Pettoni, CFSC Outdoor Recreation Program Manager, will be observing
Purpose – to talk to you about your current use of the Outdoor Recreation Center and interest
Informal - need to interact. All opinions are of equal value.
Reason for tape recorder (to refer back to for report). Please speak one at a time.
Limited group – please speak your minds as you're representing others.
Be completely honest – positive and negative comments are both useful.
- II. Introductions – around the room. I'd like to know a little bit about each of you:
First name
How long you've been at the installation
Live on/off post
If off, how far you live from the installation

OK, now we're not going to go around the room anymore, just feel free to jump in whenever you have something to say. We'd like to hear from everyone.

- III. Leisure Time
A. How do you prefer to spend your leisure time? On or off post?
(dining out, entertainment, recreation, hobbies, travel)
- IV. How do you feel about the quality of life at (installation)?
Top of mind – overall opinion of the installation

A. General quality of community activities
A place to socialize
A place for hobbies/skill development
A place for recreation

B. What could be done to improve the quality of life at (installation) ?
- V. The Outdoor Recreation Program
A. Opinion of the Outdoor Recreation Center in general (image)
How would you describe it to someone who has never been there?

B. Things you like/dislike about the Outdoor Recreation Program

C. Level of agreement with the following statements:
- people like to go to the Outdoor Recreation Center
- The Outdoor Recreation Program offers a lot to its patrons
- The Outdoor Recreation Program is an important part of life at (installation)

D. User/Non-User and why for both

- E. USERS ONLY – Usage/frequency of use of the Outdoor Recreation Program
- how often do you use
 - what activities do you currently participate in
- Ask them to list them first, then....

How about:

* Equipment Check Out/Rental

- List

* High Adventure Activities

- Sky Diving

- Snow Skiing

- Snowboarding

- Paintball

- Skeet/Trap Shooting

* Marinas/Lakes

- Water Skiing

- Scuba Diving

- Windsurfing

- Canoeing/Kayaking

- Rafting

- Sailing

* Pools

* Travel Camps, Campgrounds

- Hunting

- Hiking

- Snow Shoeing

- Fishing

- Camping

* RV Storage

* Stables

* Others??

F. USERS ONLY – Impression of the facility/atmosphere\

G. USERS ONLY – Quality/Variety of programming/offerings

H. USERS ONLY – Quality/Variety of equipment

I. USERS ONLY – Quality of staff

J. Hours of operation – open when I need it

K. Prices

- L. Programming – what would you like to see that isn't currently offered?
 - Ice Skating
 - Ice Hockey (youth and adult)
 - Ice Fishing
 - State national park tours
 - Anything you ever wanted to learn how to do?
 - Others??
 - M. How do you find out what's going on in the Outdoor Recreation Program?
Do you feel like you're well informed about activities/programs there?
 - N. How does it compare to other installations' Outdoor Recreation programs?
 - O. What is the most important change they could make to encourage your patronage?
 - P. Is there anything else they could do to encourage your patronage?
- VI. Summarization – we will be conducting focus groups at several different installations with users and non-users and using the results to make programming decisions at the Army level.
- VII. Thank participants and give incentive.